

1

If the man could have stood unassisted, he might have forgotten that dancing cannot really be done alone. The man was my grandfather, and without my grandmother's hand planted firmly at the root of his back, he could not take a step, nor could he remember his own name. Once I walked in on them at three o'clock on a bright December afternoon, a day of sun amidst all the ice and snow. The door was shut, I did not know to knock, I was a child and was getting mittens from the closet that I might go outside and make a home out of snow. I opened the door without hesitation, and into the warm orange light of that room, I stepped. They were tangled together in the blankets, naked and skin-blushed. Twisted bodies, wrinkled and loose, heaping atop each other, moving together in what could only be agony.

3

They had a pet named Betrayal. It was a darling little pony. At least they called it a pony; sometimes they weren't sure what it was. It had taken to barking like a dog, growling in a low, throaty rumble when the neighbors approached too close to the fence. They loved that poor, sick little beast, that tangle of matted fur. Another thing that made it different from most ponies was its possession of sharp teeth. Carrots bled when they entered its mouth. Children lost fingers. The pony died one winter of an equine disease called Strangles. Its lymph nodes in the neck swelled and pussied all over the place. They grew to the size of cantaloupes. Betrayal wheezed its last on a frosty January morning. The sun was out, and on the frozen pond the neighborhood children skated in figure eights. Father was hung over that morning, and when the children charged in, eyes streaming, and sobbed, "Betrayal is dead, Betrayal is dead," he rolled his bloodshot eyes over in their direction, smiled without showing teeth, and shook his head. "I don't think so," is all he said.

4

Cause for celebration:

THE BONES IN MY HEAD HAVE REARRANGED
THEMSELVES INTO THE FORM OF A
RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD.

The other day, though, I wasn't watching my path with great attention, and I smacked into a plate-glass window. Blood pooled in my lungs. I tried to sit up, but it hurt, so I relaxed and watched the strobing swirl of color at the periphery of my vision. It is quite possible, I think, that all worldly creatures are extinct, only we don't know it yet, just the way starlight takes to many years to reach earth. Sometimes I can only understand life in the context of already having departed.

5

He said the word "hate" instead of "love" because, for him, the word "hate" meant ever so much more; in terms of depth of feeling, in terms of his relationships. His teeth were still covered in black shoe polish, smearing on his lips and tongue. He looked like a kid who had just eaten a lollipop. He took the terrycloth out again, and rubbed it over these bones of his mouth. It always angered him to be laughed at. Well, shoe polish tastes something like scorn, and he missed the taste of someone else's saliva on his bent and

Austin 2

aching tongue. He got a hatchet and a honeydew melon, and he licked its clear green skin and whispered her name into its imaginary ear before he started chopping away.

6

We will close our eyes and build invisible cities of the mind. She will lie on a bed of green & brown, gossamer and dull duck feathers and she will quack herself to sleep. Stop protesting, stop bashing your head against it. It is harder and more solid than you are, and it will not alter its substance to suit your will. Memory and imagination are all that remain.

7

People all over the world are collecting things as if, through the sheer act of accruing enough of this, enough of that, they are doing something worthwhile. Penelope Arguello collects embroidered lipstick cases, though she herself scarcely wears a trace of anything darker than Vaseline on her mouth. Beatrice Tamayo has taken to stringing watermelon seeds on gilded threads and hanging these strings in the doorways of her house. When her lovers pull the beaded curtains aside to enter her dark room, she hears the soft clicking of seeds striking lightly against one another and, like Pavlov's dogs, this sound generates an automatic response in her body, only it is not her mouth that waters. I collect letters and rearrange them compulsively, hoping to put them to good use.

8

Sometimes closed eyes are better for the seeing than open ones. An open mouth always gets you in trouble, and we all know what they say about idle hands. Staying out of trouble is something I once valued, which I may be coming around to again. My mother used to pluck her eyebrows until she had nothing left above her eyes but goosepimpled flesh, and then she drew them back on with a grease pencil. So many actions are so redundant, the act of writing not excluded. What can be written that doesn't carry the stench of concepts digested before? We are combing through fecal matter with our pens, smearing it all over our faces and saying, "look, mom, at this clever thing I did." She, for her part, draws the false eyebrows thicker and thicker until they cover her entire face.

9

The robots have come down from the trees. When questioned about his involvement with this movement he shrugs. "Not without legal consult," he says, and the women are wet and all over him. Their mouths are warm, the robots' mouths are made of metal. He actually prefers the robots, but that is a long story, and not a very easy one. 8ut s0m3tim3s h3 t4inks h3 und3r5tand5.

Some

5om3tim35 h3 t4ink5 h3 und3r5tand5.

Your mother had a dream when you were buried in her belly, when you were stretching her out from the inside. In it, she climbed out of a deep well, into brilliant sunlight. She mounted a white horse and rode off, whispering into its ear, "I don't want to have this baby." The horse walked steadily along. It tossed its head. Its mane smelled of straw and warmth. "I know you don't," it told his mother, all Mr. Ed style, "but you will." She woke up with hot tears on her face and sweat pooling everywhere else on her body. She

went to the bathroom and gulped down three tall glasses of tap water. She thought about how it was going to tear her all up to push the baby out, and she wondered exactly when this action would be required of her. But she went back to bed, and she forgot the dream entirely. She would die without ever recalling it. And now here you are, her grown son, closing your eyes and stiffening in your pants to the thought of sticking your tongue in a cold, aluminum mouth.

10

There are all these fish in the aquarium.

There are all these colors on the fish.

There is this girl standing next to me.

There is the scent of cherry lip gloss in the air.

There is so much water surrounding us.

So much longing to swim across it.

To touch another body.

The girl is chewing gum. I can see the muscles in her throat flexing and slackening.

I sometimes want to do strange things to pretty girls. I want to take them home to my bed and spoon up against them without ever, ever fucking them.

I want them to sleep in my bed, and I want the scent of them to fill my covers so I can jerk off later to their memory. But I never, never want to fuck them.

12

The house is full of clean, white things. Porcelain and linen and silk drapes. The quiet woman has spent the morning gathering white roses from the trellis at the back of the house. They grow wildly. Insects traverse their leaves and the morning brings with it so much dew that they soak the woman's blouse clear through where she brushes against them. She sinks her nose into their twisting growth, closes her eyes and inhales. When the guests come in the afternoon, they automatically assume the bouquet on the table was purchased cleanly at a shop. She lets them keep this assumption, while, under the table, she fingers the tiny cut at her wrist, left by a thorn.

13

Spiders are weary of being objects of fear. Good girls are tired of being good and bad ones long to simply rest their heads upon a shoulder without the implication of a fuck, past or future. Black cats wonder why you cross the street, and ladders wish to fall on the next poor sap who goes out of his way to avoid walking beneath them. The word fuck longs to be held lovingly on the tongue, is tired of the way it is always spat. Birds wish they could swim and stars are sick of being wished upon. Bottles fear being emptied. Words are buckling under the burden of meaning. Silence is only a theory. Everyone, everything, is
tired.

14

Instead of hair, the kitten grew feathers. Not right away, but about the time its mother started grumbling and pushing it and its littermates away from her tired and swollen nipples, the kitten's calico coat began dropping out all over the place and the feathers

began to sprout. When the kitten mewed, it sounded a bit like a bird, and the family began to be confused about what kind of animal they were keeping as a pet. The rest of the kittens remained normal. They chased the feathered one around the house, pinning it against the floor or the wall or the fridge, and tearing feathers from it with their mouths. The mother cat didn't care. She perched on top of the bookshelf, licking herself. The feathered kitten took to hiding beneath the stove in the kitchen. When the family turned on the oven, it came out, dust-covered and blinking in the light.

17

You opened your eyes and resumed with the beer that sat on the table next to you, trying to numb the waking return of memory. Then you saw her. She was beating the air, a moth pressed against your softly-lit window, and you wanted to prolong unawareness, wanted to keep her or if not her the illusion – at least the sound of her in your ears, the scent of her. You grabbed her sweater, took it upstairs where you were sick again, barfing in a washbasin off the side of the bed, straining so hard your eyes burned and almost ruptured to run, oozing, down your cheeks. Every part of you was once a part of her; this is inescapable even when, drunk and with pounding head, you run your fingers pinching down each arm, trying to awaken her flesh in your flesh, to make her be not gone. Strings of vomit saliva from lips cheeks chin, you lie awake. Wipe your mouth on the sheets and roll toward a soft tapping on the window where the moth dances—blur blur of wing dust and feathered antennae and you know you can't hold her or keep her, so you just watch her until she haunts you, finally, back to sleep.

17

The sea lions emerge from the water, glistening. They flop up onto the pier and bake in the sun until their skin is dull as leather and the stench that rises from them could spoil even the heartiest appetite. Mother used to force the children to sit before their plates until every ounce of food was consumed. The night of the liver and Brussels sprouts was an epic, complete with tears and pleas, bargaining and rage, complete with falling asleep at the table and waking up again to the cold, putrid livers floating in a puddle of congealed gravy, the mushy green sprouts a heap in the corner. Tell me again how easy it is to be a child. It's not at all like in the picture books, seals with bright beach balls balanced on their nimble noses. Sea lions bark just like dogs, and their teeth are just as sharp. They bite each other and vomit piles of partially digested fish guts, lumping along the dock with nightmare eyes. Aquatic canines! AAAAAAAHHH!

18

Put me inside the room, she said, I want my body inside the room, my head outside the room, and the door shut. Her husband tried to explain that this was not possible. She had to have her eyes covered, because it was happening again, the thing where she heard the colors, where they got so loud her head began perforating, splitting down the middle with pounding blows of her pulse. He put his hands over her eyes. Her whole face was oily with sweat, and flushed. She was crying; beneath his hands he could feel the drops from beneath her lids, rolling out, could feel her eyeballs rolling back and forth as she screamed and gnashed her teeth. The veins on her neck were hardened and distended. Her hands were strapped at her sides, but still she was digging her fingernails into the fleshy

parts of her palms so hard he worried about permanent damage. He looked for her mittens and wondered about the limits of his obligation to her, the limits of his love. This was not the woman he had married. She drooled in pink; saliva mixed with blood from her lips and tongue where teeth had done their work. I WANT MY HEAD OUTSIDE, MY BODY INSIDE, AND THE GODDAMN DOOR SHUT! she screamed, she wailed, she implored. And for a moment he sat there, still. And for a moment, he thought he just might do what she asked.

19

When I fall in love it will be the grandest deception. First, there will be the ocean. I will be swimming in a tumultuous surf, in the icy, heavy slam of waves, when strands of kelp will take me over. They will wind around my arms and legs and when I struggle toward the surface and cannot make it, I will learn to breathe underwater. It will be lovely, this falling into sleep. Frantic at first, but with abandon, and as my lungs fill with the freezing, brine-filled water, with sand and stones and glittering fishes, with driftwood, and tiny sand crabs, and plankton, with friction-polished beach glass, discarded beer cans and a gull or two, as I inhale deeper, scooping up eels and seals and humpback whales, sea horses and jellyfish and anemone, as I breath in all there is, all except air, I will close my eyes and fall asleep, and I will not mind being gone.

23

The body is pounded out of silver or some shining metal, pounded thin with mallets and shaped with care. When the body is given to her, the woman slips it on like a dress, it moves around her heavily, with the weight of chain mail. It does not offer protection. In this cold, reflective coat, the woman moves in silence. She is looked at. She covers parts of the body, exposing others. When she is alone, she stands before the mirror, staring at its glint, the way it hangs off her. She shares the body with a few men, they warm the cold silver one night at a time. She sleeps alone and wakes up, not able to find her body, reaching out in the dark, touching brittle air.

24

He scuttles about like a squirrel. His eyes gleam, yellow. Picking up trash. Saving everything. When winter comes, he will make a house out of cardboard, sticks and rags. He will play the harmonica, asking for change so he can buy a pair of shoes. When he does not get enough, he will wrap his feet in duct tape and wander the city, until he reaches the beach. There will be no moon, the shoreline even darker than imagined. He will unwrap his sweaty and pale feet, the damp, wrinkly parts gathering sand, and he will walk to the water's edge. The waves will rise to cover his toes, and pull the sand from beneath this feet, but instead of turning back, he will keep walking, into the darkness of ocean which is identical to the darkness of sky. Phytoplankton and stars. He will walk beneath the waves. He will not float. His yellow eyes will close here.

25

Sleep transforms the girl into one great big parachute. You can use her to soften your fall. She will not mind. This is the purpose of a parachute, after all. But here is the part you

can only guess at: she loves it, this headlong rush through air, the way she can live vicariously, strapped to your back.

When she was young, she was taught to apologize for everything. Now, apology is on her lips constantly. She means hello, "I'm sorry," she means thank you, "sorry," she means I love you, "sorry," she means I can't stand you, "sorry," she means she is angry, "sorry," she means you owe me an apology, "sorry," she means I forgive you, "sorry." She fills with air, slowing your fall and when you land on two feet and walk off, leaving her crumpled in the grass, she whispers it, "sorry."

26

Plagued with omissions, the man whittles sticks again to sharp points. These can be used to spear fish. These can be used to deflate ballooning lies before they are told. The man is old and has no more hair left on his head, though his body is covered with it, so much hair, in fact, that his wife could never kiss his body without later freeing it from between her teeth with a sharp toothpick. While he has lost hair, his wife has lost teeth and now she sleeps with false teeth in a jar by the bed. Between the two of them, they have lost words. There was a time when they talked about things, but now there are sticks to whittle away at. Some days, his wife doesn't even bother to put in her teeth.

27

Pterodactyls are extinct because they are too grand for this world. Imagine it, these tremendous, leathery, long-billed bird-bats. The screeching! The thunderclap of wings above! Their shadows obliterating the sun as they swoop down to make off with children and medium-sized dogs! Imagine them, perched atop the tallest buildings downtown, praying on businesspeople, challenging choppers and small airplanes to races, obstacle courses through the city.

28

The night frogs come, glistening, up from the mud, up to your clean, white bedsheets, where they work together in silence around your head, sleeping on the pillow. They wear leotards. They whisper in your ears. They fold their feet close to their bodies and close their eyes so they look like round, brown turds. Once you got up when they were busy in your hair, fashioning dreams from the bits of the day that were trapped inside your subconscious. They were surprised as you rose, still asleep, and walked to the bathroom to stick your mouth straight under the tap. A few of them hid within the sheets, but one was stuck in your hair and when you bent to the sink, he plopped off and spiraled down the drain.

29

The progression of the disease is as follows:

First, the subject becomes inexplicably thirsty. So thirsty that a downpour, a swimming pool full of water, even an ocean, is not enough. The face turns grey and sags, skin growing baggy until it droops to the floor, until the nose is practically an elephant's trunk. After these two stages come compulsive high-volume television intake and linguistic degeneration. Symptoms vary, but usually this stage is marked by aphasia and a severe reduction in the subject's ability to express complex ideas, paired with perpetual

fixation of the retinas to a light-emitting screen. Oftentimes the subject will only be able to access one part of a speech, nouns, for example, or even just adverbs. Linguistic degeneration is immediately followed by the stage of rage, in which the subject can only express one emotion, that of heady and immutable anger. He wants someone to hear his stories, that they might be told someday, but his family can only cock their heads at the strings of nonsense that drool from his rubbery, inarticulate lips and dodge his sharp kicks when they walk between him and the TV. His family can only touch him gingerly with jokes and plastic kitchen utensils. They try to scrape him out of his La-Z-Boy with an economy-sized spatula, but he swats at them, spitting fragments of broken words, while, in the background, Tom Brokaw's head mumbles a low, tuneless incantation of financial figures and warfare.

30

To begin with the ending already in sight; looming in fiery glory, windward side of the flame and embers blowing into the hair. Lodging there. You cannot help this, and yet. And yet.

33

The names of craters on the moon provide inspiration for titles of her poems, for names of her future children. Ukert, Lilius, Vlaco, Biela, Endymion. But she has just been to the doctor, has just learned that she can't have children, and so she bends her head and writes, writes more, writes sometimes all night until her husband stumbles downstairs, bleary from a restless sleep, to check on her, and when she starts to read to him, when she studies the pages, the swarming emptiness of them gets right in her stomach and she bends in absence. This is a lunar wind. How can you name something you have not touched, cannot ever touch?

34

"Beauty or truth," he asked, his pen poised to write the last word. My mind kept flipping on itself. Truth of course, but what if truth is not what I'm really in search of? What if truth really isn't truth, beauty isn't beauty? What if truth can be found through the search for beauty and beauty only truly found through the pursuit of truth? He wrote "truth" in the end, and then blew on it to dry the ink. His breath was warm. We were sitting beneath a tree. The sunlight was all tangled and orange in its upper branches, but none of it was making its way to us anymore, and it was getting cold. He asked me if he could kiss me one last time. After a heavy collision of lips, teeth, tongue, he left me damp and agitated. I remained there in the purple dusk until my legs fell asleep and mosquitoes clouded around my unprotected head, trying to sift truth from beauty.

35

The house is a collection of artifacts. Things kept under glass, things kept under the pillow at night, things only imagined and dreamed of in nightmares. Artifacts held only in the memory. Reminders of a time when the things that roamed the earth were made of roots and nerve endings, nothing but glazed membranes and algae. Jellyfish, both dried and reconstituted. If you put them back in the brine-filled water, do they again begin moving? Do they again live? Do they again flutter at the mention of your name?

36

Kurt Cobain is a splatter on your pillow. Kurt Cobain is a dream in your vacant bed. Kurt Cobain speaks to your mother in her nightmares. If you ever need anything please don't hesitate to ask someone else first. Kurt Cobain is more beautiful than a school of glittering sardines that unexpectedly takes you over when you are snorkeling off the coast.

38

Dear,

I want to smear mud on your curving belly, rub my face in that mud, warm your skin with breath and tongue and put my ear to the mud smear to hear you directly. Lady, you do not have to speak.

But if you want to speak, dear man, then speak you will and I will follow you around on all fours catching your words as they spill into a paper cup and when the cup runneth over I'll pour them into a carafe and when that fills to overflowing, I will drink from it in my own time so that not a letter of your words will be lost or wasted.

My child, let me plant trees around you, plant them so close together that they form walls; a chattering house of aspen leaves on all sides. I'll warm sunlight to filter through and make sure your dreams are always only sweet.

Oh, you have me shattered and shuddering. Longing for your mouth, your tongue. If you wouldn't miss it or be pained from its loss, I'd cut it out and keep it, bloody, in a white porcelain dish on my nightstand. I'd kiss it with dry lips each morning and touch it with my own tongue every night. And if I was especially lonesome for you, I'd sprinkle a few grains of sugar on it.

Hear me in the wind tap-tapping branches against your window. I beg to come in.

42

The baby had no eyes, just gaping dark sockets. The mother filled these pits in her child's face with smooth, green grapes. The baby's eyebrows leapt up and down. Its mouth opened, expanding and contracting over the odd sounds it made. It howled just like a wild dog at the summer moon. It squealed like a donkey in heat. The mother fed it porridge to quiet it. She read until she distracted herself from her child's awful noises. She sliced up a watermelon into pieces so thin you could see through them, think pink windows, and placed them on her baby's tongue. She tried one herself. It was so thin, it had almost no taste.

43

It lived in the closed among silk blouses and old flannel shirts still carrying the scent of a Yosemite campfire. It pressed its slimy cheeks to their garments, inhaling their heady odors. Its pink alien goo, that goo that exuded from its pink alien pores, tracked along their clothing. "What is this," she asked him, pulling from the hanger her sleeveless cotton blouse; the white one with the little red flowers embroidered along the collar. "Have you been washing the whites and the colors together again?" "No," he insisted, "no, no, no." The pink alien pushed itself deeper into the dust-filled darkness of a shoe cubby. How to explain to them that she was at fault, that she existed, that she had left her

mark on the blouse because she couldn't resist pushing herself into and inhaling the scents of sweat, books and grass clippings.

45

There is no fruit to be had in January.

Only canned peaches.

Only leftover fruitcake.

I walk to the grocery store.

Inside, a baby is crying.

There are dried cherries and mangoes.

I think about melons and apricots.

I think about raspberries.

Elevator music is playing.

Even the earth is frozen.

I think about what it means to be alive.

And my head is screaming.

There is no fruit
to be had in January.

47

'Tell me a story,' she said. She was curled on her left side, facing the wall. 'I can't sleep, please tell me a story.' I scooted up close to her, so close I could feel her heart beating quickly. So close I could smell her, my nose buried in her hair, right at the silken nape of her neck. I put one arm around her, and she didn't shrug me away, instead, nestling down into me. I had never been so close to a girl. All of a sudden, I was getting that feeling. That one they said you'd know when you finally felt it. I closed my eyes and gulped. 'Okay,' I said, 'well, once upon a time there was a magical walnut tree. Its roots sank deep into the earth, and its branches spread wide in the air. And on warm summer nights it moved in a light breeze, scattering walnuts over the ground. And they used to say that, if a solitary traveler stopped under that tree on such a night, if a wanderer picked up a walnut and cracked it open between two rocks, he would find inside the shell, exactly the thing he searched for.' I waited for her to ask what that thing was, but her breaths were deep and evenly spaced. The story had done its work just that fast. I brushed my lips against her neck so softly I could pretend it was an accident if she woke and felt it. I closed my eyes and stayed awake there for some time.

48

In the photograph, his cheeks are red and swollen with air. His lips are pursed, ready to release all that air on eight flickering candles. The photograph isolates him in that instant, his eyes rolled up and to the left; the directions he always looked when trying to summon a lie. He inspects the picture now, years later. His boyhood self trying to pull down a wish from that corner of the sky. Wishes and lies living in the same corner.

He cannot remember what he wished for,
or if it came true.

He looks again. The red cheeks bulge with breath.

49

Dear A,

Last night I dreamt that I stole into your house when you were gone. I got the address from the letters you wrote. Don't worry, I wouldn't hurt you, or take anything belonging to you. I just wanted to surround myself in your things.

In my dream, you are a slob. Dishes stacked on the floor next to an unmade bed, sheets trailing in a half-eaten bowl of soup. Photographs of people's mouths (only the mouths) cut from magazines and scattered all across the floor. Above and beneath the commingled dirty and clean laundry. One of the cut-out mouths swam in a glass of water. Its down-turned red lips were swollen, the paper turning to pulp. Your window was open, and vines crawled in from the outside. I climbed down one thick vine, into the hole it grew from. I huddled in the dark among its roots, and I forgot to leave when you got home. In the night, I put my ear to the vine, and could hear through its growing green fibers, the sound of you singing quietly to yourself in your dirty room.

I'm tired of the page that mediates our exchange. Can we meet?

Until next time,

B

50

But the robots were tired of stacking the papers into neat little piles, so they stopped one day. They joined hands and shuffled out the office doors. They rented a sailboat and motored out of the harbor, which smelled of fish, although this detail was lost on them. When they reached the end of the breakwater, where the wind blows strong and waves pile atop each other, they cut the motor and hoisted the sails, and when the humans began paging them with their electromagnetic homing devices, the robots performed surgeries on one another with a screwdriver and a pair of dull tin-snips. They threw their homing device receivers into the boil of ocean. They turned to face the wind.

51

200cc of blood is drained from the brain each day through thin piping which extends into the area of damage through the hole drilled in the skull. Fluids are purged and replenished. Saline, blood, urine, feces, electrolytes, morphine, blood-pressure medication, blood, antibiotics.
blood.

53

He will build a house out of bamboo because it is both strong and flexible, because he wants the walls to curve and not crumble in the storms and floods, the earthquakes which are sure to ensue. The girl he is to marry is cursed with a bold and wicked spirit. She tames wild dogs and houses them in her mother's back yard. Her poor mother is terrified, refuses to leave the house. The girl he is to marry keeps her fingernails long and painted a dark, glossy red. The girl he is to marry is a monsoon in bed, a violent and insatiable storm. She keeps him up all night, driving him to come to her again and again, each pinnacle higher, each plateau longer and more intense. He goes to work exhausted and sore while she eats bread drizzled in honey and curls into a sweet and solid sleep. He builds a house of bamboo with soft bamboo floors that will curve and spring beneath her

dancing bare feet. She cooks a hearty stew. The wild dogs gnaw the bones she drops for them.

55

She recognizes that a piano is just a machine. She pounds the broken keys with her broken fingers, the ivory beast clicking and banging; this is no music. The piano strings were taken years ago; her crazy ex-lover using them in the rigging of his sailboat which he now sails around the pacific, stopping in sunburnt harbors. On a lonesome night when the wind's just right and the air is not so cold, the strings hum as he tacks, keels, into a gust.

Realizing that forceps are an instrument, he strikes them on the rim of a wine glass. He uses them to serve cubes of broiled lamb to the guests and he'll later use this delicate instrument to extract stuck meat from his own tightening throat.

57

One day my nose lost its hold, washing away on a sea of coconut curry. It floated upstream, braved the rapids, found estuary which it mistook for sanctuary. Meanwhile, I was upset, to put it lightly, which is to say I hadn't yet noted my discrepancy, too busy screaming at my eyebrows which curled on the floor like a pair of wooly centipedes.

Nothing could hold them, not glue gun nor staple and as I followed them, furrowing the floor on all fours, my fingernails hopped off and burrowed into the flowerpot.

"well, isn't this hilarious," I scoffed into my navel, which had taken up the gavel and sheared my pubes to make a curly wig. It said my nose was on trial for its petty mutiny; not to be confused with larceny of the same degree.

59

She started swimming and she wouldn't come out of the pool when her mom called her for lunch. Under the surface, she opened her eyes, and the sterile, chlorinated water was now murky wildness, weeds in her hair, dark spine-finned fish slipping between shadows, hiding among rocks. She started swimming, and she didn't come out from the water when the sun went down. Her legs fused together. Scales sprouted, her neck disappeared and gills emerged. Her eyes moved to the sides of her head; her vision completely changed. She moved her fins and slid through the water, torpedo fish. Silent, sleek motion. She started swimming, and she didn't come out, ever again.

60

her mouth was broken, there was a broken insistence to it. her mouth did not form around words, just strings of sound, alllalallaaa and bbbrrrrrp. her teeth were ragged from misuse. she cut threads on the notch in her front tooth where she chipped it on a porcelain mug years ago. the insistence in her broken mouth was in her tongue, constantly poking out from between chapped and peeling lips to taste: citric acid honey pencil shavings the pages of her books the undersides of her fingernails. the insistence in her mouth was in its persistent formation of sounds, even when she was too gone for meaning. the insistence in her mouth was in those ragged teeth. she left bite marks on the windowsill, the edge of

her pillow, the soft skin of her knees. small red crescents. wishes and amputated language.

62

If T met L on a train, or in a busy market. If L sat next to him so close that their bodies almost touched; legs hovering, bumping lightly at the knee with the movements of the train, the muggy warmth of two bodies radiating through two thin pairs of slacks. Or, if their hands touched in the air, hovering over the same tomato. If they met without a word, without the page. If they just met with breath and sweat and outdoor air. If they met without fear.

64

Somewhere, there is a windowsill with my conscience on it, resting thick as eighty-year dust. It tastes like pencil shavings and algae-coated pebbles. It sounds like a wind chime made of beach wood: clickety-clack. Tock tock. I rub my pinky finger over it, afraid to touch it with more commitment. A wave of nausea rolls. I drop the curtain and turn away.

65

Monsters in the closet gnashing teeth. Bone powder. Moonshine, window, open a sliver. Silver night air. Mourning dove. Parents arguing in the next room. Dawn.

66

Rattlesnakes are a thing of the past. Now they have flashing LEDs on their tail tips and a digitally recorded soundtrack of maraca clatter. Now they have fangs made of glass; thin curved syringes to dispense venom in metered doses.

67

People are hard. People are odd and beautiful and strange and people touch each other & kiss each other & pinch each other & give each other gifts & poke fun at each other & throw grenades at each other and bite each other & sue each other & complement each other's shoes & name each other & photograph each other & long for each other & shut each other down & cook for each other & nuke each other & shout at each other & fuck each other & curse each other & create each other & call each other names & tell each other jokes & blow each other kisses & touch each other's faces & jerk each other off & keep secrets from each other & pay each other for goods and services & tell each other what they can and cannot do & ignore each other & sleep with each other & kiss each other's eyelids & dedicate cheesy songs to each other & cure each other's illnesses & search for lice in each other's hair & draw each other pictures & wonder about each other & polish each other's teeth & wash each other's clothes & buy each other drinks & give each other bruises & give each other medicine & fling poisoned arrows at each other & move in with each other & divorce each other & ejaculate inside each other & tell each other 'I love you' & don't tell each other 'I love you' & paint each other's fingernails & cut each other off on the freeway & build each other's houses & dress each other's wounds & shove each other down the stairs & teach each other how to swim & shoot each other & hold each other's hands & poison each other & tuck each other into bed at night.

69

A tingle in the interstitial spaces, soft warm vibration in the spaces between things; never held solidly in the hand but constantly moving in the air between our fingers in the silence between our words in the quiet hum of electricity between us when we wake in the night, separated by inches, and cannot see each other's faces.

70

She wears a coat with the feathers of 500 red-winged blackbirds sewn into it. The coat is glossy black with chances of red throughout, scattered randomly as stars.

Somewhere, there is a swampland empty of birds.

Cattails rise, stiff, unruffled by the soft and constant beating of hundreds of wings.

Does she care? The coat perfectly matches her raven hair, her darkly-painted eyes. The coat matches her wet red lips. Her fingernails.

72

When I pick up, I'm out of breath. What are you doing, you ask, and I could tell you the truth, that I keep my lover folded up thin as paper between the books and the dirty clothes that fall between my bed and the wall; that in the three minutes since you left I reached down and felt around with suction-cup fingers, found him instantly and drew him up, inflated him with warm breath and am now halfway to a sizzling commotion, a place where sorrow is but a muted mythology. I could tell you I am tearing painlessly out of my own skin and into something far less temporary, but I don't admit these things because secret lovers, especially ones which live only in the mind, are most effective undisclosed; so instead I roll him back to his dusty lair and pant some line about running from the other room to get the phone. Behind the bed, he whines as he always does when suddenly deflated and shoved away. The room smells like a butcher shop and a greenhouse in the same breath and I am shivering, I am goose bumps, but your voice on the phone is real and so I put on a casual tone and say, yeah, hey, what's up? We may skirt around this forever. We may never be honest.

73

Digging in the garden, trying to find what sickness of soil causes the plants to come up brittle and blighted despite adequate water and tender composting, working in the dirt when hands meet something harder than soil yet softer than stone and with this touch, the skin shakes and hairs come erect even in summer's heat. Closing the eyes and sinking hands back into the earth, gulping, dry throat, and extracting the first of many bones. A fragment of spinal column. Further digging will expose the better part of an immature human skeleton. The bones will rest there, where radishes tried to take root and faltered. The bones will smell the way non-venomous snakes smell when they are trapped and have no line of defense besides glandular release.

74

The tree grew tall and in its roots it held the skeletal remains of a sparrow and in its branches it held cherries when cherries were in season and the potential for cherries when they weren't. And it grew taller, and in its roots it held trilobites and in its branches it held clouds when clouds rested low. And its root wrapped around the house someone dreamt of but never built, and its branches draped over the buzzing potential energy that hangs in the air from all things considered but never done. Its roots circled the paths of angle worms and ants and its branches carried beetles and birds' nests. The tree grew and its roots were shifted by earthquakes and its branches were fractured by windstorms. The tree grew for years, and the people sat beneath it to watch the moon slope across the sky through its heavy, twisted branches.

75

Bones are made of the dreams your mother had while she carried you in her belly. Your mother does not remember the content of these dreams, but if you could open yourself up, take a thin slice from one of your bones and place it in a slide projector, against a bare wall you could see your mother's dreams.

Shadows jump and lurch in the tight-walled room where you have set up the slide projector, the scalpels, the iodine, the bone saw. A loading dose of penicillin and cephalixin and a stick to bite on. When you do it—slicing into your forearm with a quick slash, separating tissue to expose the bone, setting the saw blade spinning, sinking it in for the cuts—the pain sears at the site, but is more prominent zipping in waves through your upper arm and down your spine, to pelvis and thigh and up to the base of your neck and into your skull. Your jawbone comes unhinged, your eyes swirl in on themselves. Each of your bones screams in sympathy. With ragged and shuddering fingers, you extract the slice from your arm and place it in the tray of the slide projector and press the button to advance it into the beam of light.

The dream plays in jumpy shadows of grey-blue and brick red. A labyrinth of sand engulfs the dreamer, the walls high and peppered with sea shells. Your mother does not appear in the dream, but it is projected from her perspective as she runs through these twisted sand passages. Ocean water streams in, first slowly, then in waves of white which slam sharply into the labyrinthine walls. Blood pulses from your wound. The images on the wall blur as your mother is lost in the icy crush.

76

I keep a skeletal umbrella in the corner by my door because I never know when it is going to rain. When I say skeletal, I mean it is little more than a pile of sticks, devoid of anything that could protect against rain, but sometimes the point is not in the protection, but rather in the past. I'll gladly walk in the rain, cold rivulets snaking through my hair, in exchange for the stories my broken umbrella could tell me if I could attune my hearing to its frequency. Was it held by an old lady feeding bread crumbs to stammering masses of rain-drenched pigeons, or by a businessman with dirty fingernails and clean teeth, a young couple who met beneath it on a rainy day in the park, she walking a blind dog, he a deaf one . . . the story is irrelevant, it is the potential for story that keeps my umbrella here. That and a love for the sensation of raindrops gathering in my hair and spilling down my neck.

77

A tangle of grey hair cascades down her back. Each hair contains a different story, though they are largely knotted together and only whole this way. She rubs her hands together and the tips of her hair begin to spark. The scent of burning circles the air around her and then she places her hands firmly on the table, and the smoke is gone, replaced by the scent of bread baking and it is only now that the children realize there is bread in the oven and it is only now that the fire in the pot-bellied wood stove begins to crackle and it is only now that the children each find a mug of steaming hot chocolate in their hands which are still red from the cold outside. And now she parts her pale lips (they are so pale they are almost white and seem to glow from the inside and one little girl thinks of mother of pearl as she stares at them and one little boy thinks of the moon) and when she speaks, her voice is not a voice at all, but a living thing that fills the room and the stories are not words but experience, and the children are not children but princes and princesses and horses and sailors and explorers and fishes and orphans and fairies and witches and foxes, and for this time there is no pile of homework waiting for them and their grandparents are not sick and their parents are not fighting and they are not afraid of the big kids on the bus, or the sound the house makes when the wind blows. And of course they must return to their assorted realities, but they do so with their stomachs full of warm bread and hot chocolate and their heads aswirl with stories. And when she is changing into her pj's, one little girl finds, caught in the weave of her purple sweater, two long, silver hairs. She keeps them, pressed between pages of her diary.

78

I saw her today, stomping down the street with one handbag tucked under each of her blubbery arms. She wore a floral mumu and a traditional men's haircut, short and parted to one side, doing nothing to mute her baggy red jowls that swung, pendulous, with each of her thunderous footfalls. She was on her way somewhere, yes, she was. I don't know where she was going or where she was coming from, but for that moment she was in my view from where I sat at the bus stop, and would you believe it, she was smiling like a little kid, her eyes round and open so wide, her eyebrows scattering across her forehead like a brushfire. And as she lumbered out of my line of view on legs the size of sequoias, jiggling like gelatin, I found my face bent into a smile, steamrolled by her unapologetic joy.

79

The woman shows anyone on the bus who will stop and look a photo of some dog pee on the sidewalk. "The dog he goes pee and there appears a praying mantis," she says, "and everyone laugh, what is this crazy lady taking picture of, but I say there is art everywhere if you just wait long enough." She produces another photograph, this one of a tree trunk which she calls the Man Tree, due to a stubby and firm angular growth which juts out from the otherwise smooth trunk. She blushes and laughs. "I could hardly believe it when I saw it," she says. "If you wait long enough, art is in everything. Even the drops of water." People on the bus move around her, avoiding conversation. But she doesn't seem to mind. Her fingers shuffle her photographs while she squints out the window, watching the city kaleidoscope on by.

Here, the cabin takes root. Its foundations have deteriorated, the structure held steady by the ivy which has taken over from the inside out, winding up the interior walls to the ceiling, a few stray vines snaking out the windows, moving on stale automotive breeze, caressing the air as curved, beckoning fingers. From the exterior, the cabin is all dry grey wood, smooth beams dovetailed together at the corners. Within, there is nothing but deep green and the sound of water trickling down. Honey-colored light oozes from the windows, as if new springtime sun permeates those four crumbling walls. But nothing can be seen within, the flora growing so thick as to obscure all windows. The aroma about the cabin blends pine and licorice fern, dogbane, nightshade, and skunk cabbage. Two people enter that shelter together. The hinge on the door squeaks, but offers surprisingly little resistance, and seals behind them. There is no indication of their entry, and their absence from the outside world goes unnoted. Quite simply, they have vanished. The street is an oil slick rainbow. Newspapers drift in the direction of the prevailing wind.

87

Milk white spreading from the old fish into the water, over an indentation in the river bottom where the female has expelled rows of dark orange, translucent eggs. A musky decay smell wafts from the still points in the river, the scents of death and sex so close together as to be simultaneous. Another burst groans from the old fish, he tries to swim upright, but synapses are misfiring and he can no longer distinguish the river's crest from its floor; darkness and light have intertwined so now there is just the giddy tilt, the scrape of scales sloughing off on sharp rocks, his whole left side a torn and rotting thing. There is another row of glowing orange eggs and there is ejaculation, convulsion, shuddering, stillness.

88

One night I woke to find that my body had split apart into thousands of small trembling blood-moist slabs of meat. They squirmed along the floor like leaches or unshelled snails. How am I alive? How am I forming thoughts? My fingernails skittered across the hardwood floor and slunk under the door. They slipped to his apartment and tap-danced on his sleeping spine. They touched him so lightly he didn't even wake up, but his girlfriend did. She collected my disembodied fingernails in soft cupped hands and held them hostage in an empty beer bottle. My fingernails couldn't escape, so they got drunk off what little was left and passed out in the bottle. The streetlight shone dully on them through the window and the brown glass.

Back at my apartment, my veins strung themselves into a spider web formation in the cluttered corner of the room. The fleshy leech-chunks of my body gathered in the room's center, leaking blood on the wood floor. My teeth jumped up and down on the telephone, calling my mother and droning on about how unhappy I was, how I just wanted to move to the country and become a nice, wholesome girl with long hair and bangs, with healthy, full hips and a brown plaid blouse. My mother didn't say a word. Perhaps her spleen had answered the phone.

89

Where his heart was supposed to be, it was. Burning dimly with the solace scent of pine. Language confines. On the day of the solstice he died, leaving behind him a trail of orange rinds and wing-dust of fairies and moths. When he was alive his mouth smelled of licorice and his pocket of tobacco. He never had any money and he was never lonely. He shared his peanuts with peasant squirrels

91

To court her, bring wildflowers and pretty weeds gathered from the walk to her house. Write poetry – not stodgy formal verse, but erotic lines that turn the body into letters of the alphabet, the sort that will make her want you to touch her, to rearrange her into new words. Things never before written or spoken. She's not so young anymore, and she's felt a variety of things, and she wants something so deep she stands at the brink of it, dizzy. She has eyes that sparkle and a mouth that can shoot you off like a rocket to unexplored territories of space. The galaxy shimmers around her, this shawl she wears. You can touch her, with her permission, but you'd better touch her with the whole universe shivering behind your fingertips. She lives in a house made of bones, yes, a house made of bones, and it looks just like any other house because the bones are hidden beneath wood and insulation, ground to powder and spread in the mortar between bricks. And in her bone house, she rests. She closes her eyes and the stories of all the people who are now between her walls project into her skull like a newsreel and clatter around up there. They dance, they bang on tambourines, they kiss her goodnight. They pour into her like well water trickling into a holding tank. If you court her, you must be permissive of her disorder. She keeps the bath full of swamp water, and when her pet tadpoles grow into frogs, she names each one and lets them choose whether they'd like to stay or go live in the wild. Most of them stay, and they hop all over the house. They gravitate toward any water. Be careful when you reach for the glass on her bed stand. If you court her, do not try to change her. She will not alter her substance for you, or even lover her voice. Do not ask her to bathe. She'll bathe when she's ready, when the monsoons come at her will.

92

The doctors find it difficult to operate on migratory sorrows and chance illuminations. So we are sent home with a vial of aspirin. This will make for a stronger heart, or so we are told. Later, after goodbyes have been said and I am lying in a narrow bed with a plastic mattress, I will feel my blood coagulating in all the narrow spots in my veins. Retention is a constant problem. I close my eyes and shape a mental prayer for release. That each moment be directly relieved by the one following it. If nothing is held, nothing can be harmed. Well, at the hospital, there is a great big tropical fish tank and in one corner a tiny message is scratched. Let me out. I close my eyes and shiver.

94

I took my porcupine coat to the cleaners today. There is so much blood and mud on the needles, it is overdue for a good cleansing. The old lady behind the counter just stares at me, blinking, through thick trifocals. "I'm sorry," she finally says. "This is a garment? You wear? It looks like an animal."

“No, Ma’am, this is my coat,” I tell her. I slide it on, gingerly, first one arm, then the other. I shuffle down into the slick quiet clatter of quills. Pace a little line back and forth in front of the counter. “See,” I say, “stylish, right?”

She stands with her hands on her hips, lips puffed out, eyebrows low. “I don’t know about that.”

95

You unname me. When we are together in the heat-stained darkness, there is no alternate reality. Your neck. My tongue. Your fingers. And the truth in this exchange.

98

A dark turquoise door with bright red bougainvillea clambering around it on a trellis. Sunshine outside, laughter within. A thousand silver dollar pancakes and dancing, dusty bare feet, a braid rug and a wall-shelf full of old books. Sparkling mermaid skirt. Pears, mangoes, lemons, on the white windowsill. A blue translucent dish full of clear water and light. And a broom that sings when you swoop it around the room.

101

The ball bounces twice as high as the point from which it is dropped. The physicist pushes his spectacles up on his thin nose, saying, “run that by me again, darling.” In the next room a dog is barking. Has been barking for days. They feed it around the clock, but even as it eats, it barks. It is never hushed. The physicist’s wife drops the ball again; again it hits the hard wood floor and propels itself _ of the way to the high-vaulted ceiling.

102

A man found a seashell in an abandoned building. It was small and bleached white with time, or perhaps it had been that shade from inception. A man held the shell to his ear, and, instead of hearing the ocean, he heard a voice. The voice was low and raspy with age, or maybe it had always contained that grit. There was no way to be sure. But the voice was soft, reassuring, against the cold spiral of his ear. The voice said, “Son, I’m proud of you.” The man jerked the shell away from his ear and swung his head around, but it was just him and the stale air in the long-empty room. A faint glow filtered from the shell’s opening. The man gulped, put the shell in his pocket.

104

Magnolia blossoms pressed to the wall, sweat in white pink tangles. You lower your mass onto me, whisper something the waiting dark spiral of my ear. The words I don’t understand, but the sense constricts my chest, dilates my pupils. Breathing heavy vapors, pillow pressed tight to muffle sound. You pushed your face into the center of waxy white petals sloping away from pistil and stamen, breathing ripe pollination, sex on the verge of death, seconds before the flower folded, depositing itself on the earth in a small heap of thick, skin-white petals. The path we walked amassed with them. You stopped, gathering blooms big as your face, loving their thick white veins, their muted pink edgings. As soon as you touched them, they began browning, and within minutes were shriveled remnants; putrid and smelling of swamp. Your downturned face crumpled. I

made the mistake of saying the first thing I thought. It's just like our relationship. You dropped the crumpled, stinking things and walked fast up the trail, late afternoon light touching you through the spaces between leafless branches. White petals browning in your footsteps. I didn't know if I should follow, stuck my face in a flower. It smelled like your soft neck. You were gone up the trail and I wondered when or if I'd see you again. You didn't call that night and, in my lonesome bed, I smelled that same flower; a trace on my pillowcase.

105

If I could just smoke while sleeping she would be born of a cloud passing my lips. I wake with pressure on my ribcage. I have let the cigarette drop to the quilt. My grandmother's quilt, and now the threads are burning. I know this is a dream because I am calm to the fire. What concerns me is this smoke woman, a figment of my tobacco exhalation. She sits heavy on my chest, leans over my face, her long smoke-grey curls tickling my cheeks, her aroma clawing my nasal passages up to sinuses so I have to sneeze but hold it, gulping and licking my lips as she smiles and bends her mouth to mine. The quilt-fire now encircles us both and my tongue is shy, hiding behind my own teeth while hers seeks entry, steaming into spaces. Stop, I say, you'll set me afire, too. Silly boy, she says, that's just what you want. You know, you made me up.

107

A pomegranate is peeled in a room lit only by dim orange streetlights. She pretends to sleep on her side with her face to the wall, but she can still smell and hear what she does not see. In the morning the fruit will be gone, but the floor will be sticky and tiny shreds of peel will cling to her bare feet when she walks to the bathroom.

108

in my quiet drainage ditch in my beast salon legs crossed primly at the ankles and blackout curtains drawn lounging large and up for grabs see it now, now fall the precipice teeming with crabs that gallop down the hall to dream of friends and wake alone incapable of calling back or even picking up the phone when they call for a little chat because what if the voice expands to wants or pleas or needs each person with their own demands I've had enough of these

109

Copper-scented fruit was eaten secretly in a dimly-lit closet under the stairs, where the slamming of footsteps above would be enough to make most men hide away their sweet contraband, but he just kept sucking nectar from the cold, black pit. He tossed the pit in the dusty corner behind the water heater and beneath cobwebs just as they forced the door, mag-lights blaring in his face. They dragged him out and shoved him to the ground, yelling in the language he understood but had to pretend he didn't, WHERE IS SHE WHAT DID YOU DO TO HER? He swallowed and swallowed. Ran his tongue over his teeth lest his breath carry a trace. They kicked his ribs, sat him up, stripped him down.

110

Your mother, before you were born, fell from a tree. An economy of language was formed in the purple yellow white-hot pain in her jaw. Throat. Windpipe. You were pulled tight, stretched through a series of elongations. What doesn't kill you makes you gracious.

111

One day, letters masqueraded as numbers. They were curious, thought how easy it would be to conform to firm and clear rules. A miniature hailstorm contained within brackets of this happy matrix. The writer went to her typewriter to find it converted to a calculator. She did h3r 835t with wh4t sh3 h4d. sh3 tri3d to hid3 h3r dis4pointm3nt.

112

They named him bonkers and sold him to the circus train. After all, he could already walk a mile on his hands while spinning plates on his feet. He slept in a boxcar of hay alongside a camel who exposed its teeth as if to bite whenever he rustled around in the night, so he tried not to drink much water late in the day and when he had to he peed in the hay. The train crossed the country again and again with a clearly-plotted and continuous itinerary. As the years progressed and the routine remained the same, he developed a mental map of their route, a network of train track from city to city that he knew by heart without seeing anything surrounding it. He fell monstrously in love with the six-hundred-pound tattooed lady, whose body was a map of the world; he wanted to explore her entire massive geography. The Nile River of her neck, her Timbuktu, her Vegas, the arctic tundra of her. Every time the team of elephants hauled her into the center ring on her glittery, buckling carriage, he felt his heart crumpling into a tighter ball of devotion. But he was too busy doing back flips under the watchful eye of the ringmaster to ever catch hers. It went on this way until she died of a massive coronary. What could he do but go on? Bonkers the clown, frenetic and jolly in his huge, floppy shoes, his days a string of pratt falls and cream pies to the face. At night he crumpled into a heap of exhausted sleep, swaying with the movement of the train. He always had the same dream, that he was on a ship, that he would wake up with nothing to see for miles save for unmapped grey ocean and grey sky.

118

Her voice licks my inner ear. The sensation and the scent of close lightning – hairs prickling in burning air – this is what I feel when she is near. Dear, if you could wear that flowing skirt and simply stand behind me in the fog, your skirt could blow around my legs, enfolding me. I feel you warm against me when the seeing is impossible. I have been trying to erase you from my imagination, but you are too heavy a stain on my memory. A scent, taste, color. Something capable of spreading.

119

She grew cyclamen, pale pink, in pots aligned on the tile next to the tub. They thirsted for the hot vapors rising. She sank down into the bath and watched the petals softly flex, gathering drops of moisture, as she touched her naked skin underwater.

119

I am learning things about you from photographs that I never got to know directly. A younger, thinner version with apron full of plums, a scarf tied over thick hair. Or, when your head was shaved for surgery. The incision I never saw, jagged as any Midwest lightning bolt. Storms were common when I was a girl, the last letter says. The color of sky just before they broke was the most reliable indication of pending force. When the sky turned green and the air outside had a hidden electricity, made arm hairs stand and quiver, we knew it was time to get underground. Half of your girlhood was spent in the linoleum-floored basement, where the washing machine often overflowed to warp the cheap baseboards and the extra bookshelf – the one with the old children’s books, the half-set of Encyclopedia Britannica and the Chicago Manual of Style, the instruction manual for home repairs, the Merck Manual of Medical Conditions. What is Alzheimer’s, you asked. The room smelled always of mildew. The floors marred with dark scars from roller-skating.

120

She made dolls out of mud collected in the morning, early, before the sun had time to touch the day into reality. The dolls were aligned on a baking sheet (lips, torso, arms, legs, fingernails) and charred slowly into the late afternoon. When they emerged, the sun was setting. She wired their joints so they could flex slightly, then kissed each one on the forehead before posing them on the sill against the dark window.

121

I build a replica of my dad out of the things he should have been made of in the first place. The feathers of scrub jays and honey-colored finches, stones from a hidden ocean beach, the sound of a train ratcheting along a trestle to disappear into a tunnel, a modest portion of average cab sav, and the smell of oatmeal cookies baking. These components are cobbled together; stuck with carefree bubble gum and stitched with the blonde leather of a worn catcher’s mitt. I dress him in bike shorts and a bright Hawaiian shirt. For eyes I apply tiny mirrored buttons which will catch all the color and light they can contain. I feed him nothing but coffee and he grows wild and comical; my crazed scarecrow dad, running amok with puns, doing back flips in my empty childhood bedroom, showing me how to flatten pennies on train tracks, how to weld a nut solidly in place on my enemy’s car so he can’t remove the tire when he gets a flat, how to whistle through my teeth. He teaches me the difference between poisonous and safe plants in the wild, and whispers into my ear how to have an affair without getting caught. But you did get caught, Dad, I say. He looks up from painting his flattened-penny toenails and laughs; tells me anyone who’s having an affair wants to get caught. He is growing huge, as big as the room, coffee-scented steam pouring from his ears. For exercise, I take him to show & tell at school. He gets red in the face and chases the kids around the room, roaring like a monster. They zip around me in circles until I can’t tell if they’re laughing or crying.

125

I am a very good boy. I do whatever my mother asks me to. I wash the dishes every night, and dry them, too. I polish the floor on my hands and knees. I always say thank you, always please. When I walk with a lady along the street, I always walk on the side next to

the cars and if she wants to smell a rose from a garden we pass, I pluck it for her first, so she does not have to strain her perfect neck to reach it. If my mother should fart when she sits down or rises, I pretend not to notice it because ladies never fart, and if I fart I call it “breaking wind” and I beg pardon for it. When my mother snores I bury my head in a pillow and say nothing of it in the morning. My mother is never dirty, never sweats or gets upset, never has to raise her voice or her hand to me, because I am a very good boy.

126

She woke in a hole; of course it was dark, or course it smelled like earth and mold. She wriggled and squiggled and tried to back out of it, but the more she moved, the more dirt fell on her head and sank around her legs, encasing her there. Her lungs, a choke, the smell, the dirt, she tried to calm her flailing mind and cycles of panic and quick sleep shaded her brain; pinching consciousness in hot bursts of color, as fireworks flare the sky on 4th of July, making the viewer long for a hand to hold, just a gentle love to stand entwined with to share the spectacle; because no experience is real in a vacuum, at least not verifiable, and being alone is fine but there are no stories for one, just thoughts. She thought, I am dying alone in the dirt, watching the glittering of my own dying brain. The inside of her head sounded like a fluttering chortling gleaming mass of pigeons when the old lady brings stale bread to the park next to the humming freeway bypass. She choked and her hand shook, reaching to grasp a root or an earthworm; something, anything, alive.

127

Tiny brass rivets are inserted into the flesh, hinging the arm in places where it was not intended to bend. She emerges from sleep to find she now has three elbows on each arm. Honey, what’s going on, she asks her husband. He steps out of the closet, half-dressed for work, his shirt open and his pants undone. What’s what? He asks. To show him, she twists her arms into crooked little spirals. I woke up with extra elbows. Holy Jesus, he says, your arms! He stands in the closet doorway, his hands flickering around the front of his shirt as if smoothing wrinkles. His mouth opens and closes with no sound. Finally he asks, does it hurt? Not at all, she says, but it’s making me sick to my stomach. They shouldn’t bend like this. Did anyone come in in the night? What time did you come to bed? He looks at the floor.

131

She book-ended her day with extractions of teeth. These were done delicately with tapered silver forceps, or roughly with needle-nosed pliers. Her subjects dreamt of metal-beaked birds. Screeching robotic pterodactyls and nitrous oxide flashes, subtly leaving the body, standing alone on the arid, metallic-smelling planes of dried blood. Roots all yanked from the ridged ground, the earth underfoot pockmarked with holes. A hot wind. Acid welling from throat to back of tongue. Tonsils numb, the tongue a dead, fat, grease-soaked whale lolling in the mouth.

132

I don’t mind paying \$2.00 for your blood transfusion, but I’ve got to warn you, my eyes are stuck. The clinic gave me glasses made of ice and now my eyes are frozen in one position, though the images that pass through my static line of sight are perfectly clear.

Still, my eyes are stuck and my brain follows my eyes. Right now, your face is framed perfectly in my icy gaze, and I pray you never leave. How much do you need the transfusion, anyway? The staff at the clinic are very kind, but considering what they did to my vision, I'd be concerned about what they could pour into your veins. Ocean water or antifreeze or pasta sauce, dogs' blood or apricot juice . . . honestly, we have no way of knowing.

133

My typewriter and I are getting married. We will have human children with letters for teeth; they will bite the other kids at school, leaving alphabetic welts. We will not punish them, but will read their fleshy fictions with pride and send them out to play in the woods or the library, and when the house is still, we'll snuggle up in bed and make love; all ink, flesh and sweat. The clacking and banging of our wordy lust tumult will fill the room, permeating the walls. The whole house will shudder, windows rattling, walls bending, until our home is just a pile of rubble swimming with letters. The alphabet will flood from our stammering meat and metal, a wave of words washing down the street, swooping up our children, our neighbors, their cats, dogs, cars, houses. The entire city block, slammed with our momentum, will have no choice but to drift. And we will keep writing, oblivious to the frenzy, until the streets are awash in ink and sweat and our words course down storm drains, into the city's subterranean veins, and finally out to the sea.

137

The bridge has burst in the wake of all the stored-up sentiments that go unuttered. A million scenarios imagined for each I enact. On our property there was a holly tree, which has since been bulldozed. I used to sit inside it, imagining you, awkward, lanky, staring at me from behind those plastic-framed glasses. The holly leaves scraped a bit going in, but the inside branches were bare and we would be held in a wash of golden green light. How calmly I loved you in my mental version of it, leaning down from the branch on which I sat to kiss your lips for the first time. The taste of sweat. Licking dry lips and moving in once more. You, a gulping mass of wishes and mild, excited fear. Me, wild, climbing higher than you would dare. The holly tree was a place adults couldn't see into; they would never imagine us sneaking in there, the way those sharp-pointed leaves would ravage our tender skin. We'd show them. Take my hand, I'll lead you through this relatively free of harm.

At some point, I learned to pressurize my longings, to shove them down, acting on them only in moments of lucidity or intoxication. Our bodies part and begin cooling in the dark, and you ask me what I want. I want to hold you in silence, because the reality of the situation baffles me. How to explain that I want to take you back to when we were young, before we even knew each other, and hold you in that gone, hallowed green light.

139

His head was a beehive, swarming against itself. Drones and workers filling each pentagonal slot with chewed-up brain pulp, waxy and thick, turning sweet with time. His head was a heavy moaning he could not contain. Bits of his fractured brain buzzed away to visit other flowers in every imaginable field and forest glade. There is a place where memory prevails and a place where it's muted, contained only in the muscles and the

cells, the silent residual damage of irreversible action. When he was a boy he climbed to the eaves of an old house and batted down a paper wasps' nest with a blunt stick. His friends cheered, but later that night he cried into his pillow, thinking about the hundreds he had rendered homeless. He could feel them burrowing into his ear, chewing his brains to pulp and spitting them out in a new, deranged form.

143 (the only anomaly of the project, taking the space of 2 cards)

I water my brother and rotate him on the windowsill so he can receive sunlight from all sides. His leaves curl slightly at the edges, trembling as if stirred by a breeze, though the air in the room is still. "You're welcome, lazy-ass," I say, leaning close to inspect his buds. For weeks and weeks they've been like this: full and green, swollen to the point of bursting, but not quite open yet. I cannot see the color of the blossoms sleeping beneath their waxy sepals. Today the buds look droopy, hanging their heads, pulling their branches down. A couple of them are vaguely brown at the fringes. "What's the matter, Jim," I ask. Of course, he doesn't respond. Everyone has a different idea about how to fix him. Mom came in with five different kinds of fertilizer. She sprinkled his roots with compost and chicken poop. Dad thought he needed to stay out on the porch, then; a. because he smelled so rank and b. because we were caudling him and he wouldn't learn to grow up and be a man in the shelter of our kitchen windowledge. Our aunt played hippie music and arranged crystals in the dirt around him, encouraging him to acknowledge his feelings. All to no avail. I have also implemented a variety of tactics. First I tried appeasing him, playing like I wasn't concerned by his lack of growth, hanging out with him and watching movies, playing the music he liked while we were out of the house, even spilling a little beer on his roots now and then when nobody was looking. When that made no difference, I tried to piss him off – singing cheesy songs he hated at the top of my lungs, depriving him of television, of water. I moved him to an abandoned room and left him without company for days on end, hoping maybe he'd get bored or angry and snap out of it, but when I finally checked on him he was just the same, so I moved him back to the kitchen and resumed trying to care for him like I would any other house plant. I bend closer. The browning edges of his buds worry me; my chest is constricted with tightness that borders on aching. "Shit, man, what's going on with you?" I ask. A musky smell wafts off of him – half sweet, half sour. I can't tell if it's growth or decay. What if those buds are filled with maggots and festering rot? The odor is growing more pungent. I heft open the window and slide his pot to the edge. Closer, until a corner of it extends over the lip. "Help me out here, man," I say, "I don't know what you want me to do." His leaves flutter in a breeze, moving vaguely back and forth in the sunlight outside and back into the shade. If the wind blew a little harder, he could fall out the window. I reach out and edge him forward another few centimeters, holding my breath.

144

I take her typewriter to the park while mine stays home in my bed. I feel guilty, but hers has a carrying case and, anyway, I have to walk it over to her house, so it's not like I planned this literary infidelity, it just sort of happened. But her machine is sleek. Bending my nose to its inky innards, I find it smells just as sweet as mine does – that same metallic softness (is it a product of the ink or the metal or is it some kind of amniotic fluid of incubated words swelling just on the verge of birth? I don't know, but whatever

the case, it is one of those scents that evokes in me a physical response, a warm chest-ache, the way the delightful stink of an absent lover lingering in a worn t-shirt might cause the heart to beat strangely or swell to push on the lungs, hindering intake of breath . . . if you haven't smelled a typewriter, go to the nearest one right now and bury your nose in it, you'll see . . .) This typewriter has deep green keys. It sports a question mark, unlike my honey, who also has trouble with alignment since that night when, fumbling with someone in my bed, we knocked it to the floor with a pained crash. Despite my devotion to my typewriter, I love hers, too. Why does it seem that every earnest action of the heart is also a betrayal – that loving these green keys beneath my fingers in all this wind and sunlight somehow diminishes my degree of love for my beautiful silver & black-keyed machine with all its quirks and oddities? After a year of improvising, we have learned together how to make a question mark out of the punctuation marks it possesses, this signaling a new stage in our relationship, something deeper than the declarative. Why can I not swim in one love, free for a moment, without drowning in the one I'm forsaking? I want to promise myself to every single possibility with sincerity, without betrayal.

145

Sprawled on a park blanket, looking up through the sun-caught, breeze-drifted leaves, she said, "let's make a quilt of sunlight and air, all warm and yellow and full of wind. Then next time we fight we can wrap it around us, just like this, and we won't have to be so awful to each other." Her cheeks blushed dark with ordinary fantasy. Her toes swirled in the grass and dirt, and she gasped when the wind ruffled her skirt, kissing the insides of her thighs. People are always saying I. I love you. I'm hungry. I want this. Instead, her fingers wandered in the direction of declaratives, collecting berries which she placed in her skirt. She asked if I knew whether they were poisonous or safe to eat, and when I said I had no idea and we could look them up on Wikipedia when we got home, she proceeded to eat them. Not just one, but all of them. Cramming her mouth full of them; handfuls and handfuls, red and purple and almost black, their juice staining the corners of her mouth with dark, dangerous-looking ink. Then she lay on her back with one hand on each side of her belly, which made a small mound, softer than the earth, but swollen as if by magma, rising. She moaned, I couldn't tell if it was from pain or pleasure. She's such a conundrum, I could crack my head against her. She would not allow me to give her water or call a doctor. With tears dangling on her short, blond eyelashes, she said, "I'm happy now," so I left it at that and simply held her hand. What good are words, anyway? I could say love, or I could show her a spider web gathering dew at each node and casting off small, mild rainbows. It is there, in the bloodshot blink of her eye; in her heart racing 167 beats per second.

146

On the other side of Old MacDonald's farm, he has a petting zoo with long-limbed ladies dressed in leather and fur, A-U-A-U-Y. With a slap-slap here and a stroke-stroke there, here an ass, there a kiss, everywhere a touch this; old MacDonald had an adult petting zoo, A-U-A-U-Y.

147

There is a muscle in my pants that won't relax; all morning you've been arching through my mind in a shower of jerking muscles, thick water and the sugar bursts of fireworks evaporating in the sparkling dark. Play my piano toenails, I'll whistle the corresponding chords, I promise I'll be gentle when I wrap those cords around your wrists or weave them through the holes in your porous bones; a slight blurring of the lines is necessary to cure what ails you – a heart that bangs for the wrong thing, gingivitis and the pink that it leaves on the floss when you bind yourself up, run tape around the edges, ship yourself to me via media mail. I have nothing to declare. They don't even let you bring apples into Canada, so let's stop on the border for a quick & dirty picnic in the parking lot of the am pm. We have no paring knife, so the pulp drifts down our faces. I lick my chin and imagine the taste of other skin. How many mornings have you woken up next to a relative stranger and in that hazy space of pre-remorse closed your eyes and imagined the breathing heap in bed beside you were someone or something else? The letter read: return to sender. Send her a dozen red roses or something equally cliché for only \$29.99 get it while it lasts. Get it get it. Get it? Get in my rusty carriage. I'll take you to the ball in my brain. Don't be frightened, this will be over in a minute; I'll make you my mermaid and you won't feel a thing.

147

Moving around a thing, the way one might sidestep a perfectly burnished patch of wood floor for days in a dance of recollection over the space that once held a distasteful stain.

148

Take anything resting under heavy dust in the attic crawl space and make a game out of it. With brown paint and a yellow-handled broom, we fashioned a fine giraffe, and there were potato bugs, too. We dubbed them elephants based on color and texture of skin, but they didn't do anything except ball up when touched. This was fun for a minute, but we soon got bored and started trying on your dead grandma's clothes – dresses that button to the chin and strings of pearls long enough for little girls to stumble over, going down the stairs. We took turns, you in the lipstick and me in the suit. We said, "I do," and the thin molecules of air trembled between our lips; and when our dry mouths brushed so softly it could have been imagined, we jerked back, pulse choking in throats. My first kiss and I, not yet ten, wearing a bowler hat, my guts all jello and squirm. You took my hand, licked your lips and drew me in again. Home, at dinner than night, the colors even look different. I watch my parents' tongues as they eat, drink, speak, and I know a secret. Later still, in the blurry dark of my top bunk, up near the fading glow-in-the-dark stars, I lick my fingers and run them, moistened, along my ribcage, thighs. It is the first time I have considered my own body this way, and I wonder what else I don't know. In the dark I quietly kiss my own wrist, hot, and fluttering with pulse.

151

The first week living alone in that house, she woke every night with the memory of sound echoing in her ears. There was never any sound exactly, not now in the dark room, but the residual imprint of it reverberated in her brain, as if someone in her dream had just been laughing – an octave-jumping maniac laugh that scraped the ceiling – or as if there had been the routine sound of heavy breath, in and out, or something being dragged along

a floor. She couldn't keep her eyes open now, was chopping meat on a white plastic cutting board, preparing to freeze it in single servings, when the doorbell buzzed. She jumped, the knife slicing into the side of her thumb. She rinsed her hands, wrapped her thumb in a paper towel, leaving the meat in a pile of bloody pieces, pink water encircling them. The porch was vacant when she opened the door, just a paper bag galumphing end over end down the street in a strong wind. When she got back to the kitchen, the meat was gone, a trail of vaguely pink fluid over the edge of the counter and across the tile floor. She clasped the knife in one hand, the phone in the other. "Richard, is this some kind of a joke?" she asked the empty room, her voice thick with mock confidence.

152

When I bleed on you accidentally, you don't say anything, and in a way I'm thankful, and in a way this stretches the moment into something more awkward. If you just made an uncomfortable joke, at least that would be an exchange, some sort of clue to what you could be feeling. What can I glean from your silences? We drive to the clinic, you with your hand soft on my knee. I can feel your warmth through the quilt you draped around me. The rain outside contains ice crystals, they sparkle on the windshield for an instant before the wipers swoop them away. They hit the glass with a sharper sound than ordinary weather. I sit within the rush of hot air from the vents, the spray of water beneath our tires, the squeal of wiper blades. I can't speak or look at you. When you came into the bathroom, I was busy filling a white towel with red. I said it didn't hurt, but already you knew enough to start warming up the car and call ahead to tell them we were coming back. I keep waiting for you to jump ship. Who wants this? I don't ask you to stay, I couldn't. But I don't tell you to go, either, and this leaves me guilty. Instead I ask you constantly to tell me stories, trying to cast a wide enough, deep enough net to gather as much of you as I possibly can. And I share myself with the same intensity. Our stories hold us. We both know I'll never go on those backpacking trips we're always planning, will never sleep beside you under the desert sky, the Milky Way spilling over us. We will simply wait for this storm to break, furrowing this same road of blood and imagination.

154

How adjectives clot & adhere to the skin of a thing, until its substance is worn away, replaced by a description: category, texture, degree. A woman soon learns to make herself supple, contorting to match others in tone and bearing, comporting herself as she perceives others desire to see her. This continues until a woman becomes a stream, moving with slick grace over and between obstacles with all the conviction of water.

158

The upstairs neighbors are at it again, moans low, dripping through my cracked and cobwebbed ceiling, falling in a rapidly-cooling puddle over my body where it lies naked and restless on top of the blankets. In a world where we are trained to be embarrassed by other peoples' sex lives, where we learn to muffle our ears and turn up the radio, I am faulty. I tune my hearing to each creak of furniture, each panted breath. On crowded busses, I close my eyes and deeply inhale the scents of those close to me, savoring the electric brush of a stranger's bare arm against mine. When an ass bumps my thigh I don't pull politely away. I want to dissolve in the collective gyz and sweat of the masses; want

to know all of you not only by name but by flesh, taste, friction. In my solitary bedroom, I listen to the sounds raining from the ceiling, closing my eyes and opening my mouth that I might catch even an imagined drop of what is passed between.

161

In a room thick with fallen pollen and the downy lost feathers of baby ducks, the boy, home from nursery school where he has been learning 26 powerful marks to place on paper, is wrestling with a rabbit. It hopped, fully formed, from the R page in his primer, and twitched its nose, thumping its huge paws on the floor. Then it came at him. The beast equals the child in height, but is more thickly-muscled. It presses its neck into the boy's neck, and shoves at his straining torso with its heavy, inarticulate paws. The boy grasps for anything he can hold; ears, whiskers, but the rabbit's coat is glossed with the pungent oils of its body; the scent unnerves him, takes away his hold. His hands slide over that gleaming, waxy fur. The rabbit presses him into a corner. Its hurried breathing makes a high whine where the air pushes wetly through the flaps of skin that protect its nostrils.

162

You are borrowing sorrows and paying them back at a high interest rate. When you wake in the early afternoon, half the day's been spent in a fractionally awake dream-state of worry and grief. Your body is damp and cold-sticky, and your head aches mildly. Swing your feet to the carpet, open your canvas sack, and start heaping the troubles in.

Where do they all come from? The papers, the news, pieces of strained conversation between friends, lovers, families. That stack of unpaid bills, that unidentified smell in the kitchen, that itch, that person you hurt, that thing you said, that thing you couldn't quite bring yourself to say. These are incubated in dreams, breeding and spawning sneaky, more evolved offspring that grow larger and more menacing as you avoid looking them in the eye.

As you pile them in your sack, the troubles claw and bite your hands and arms. Pressed together, they fight, they howl, they nestle against each other and fall asleep. You circle the room, chasing them out with a broom, rounding them up and containing them. The imaginary ones are the hardest to track, the slipperiest to hold, but you catch even these. You tie the sack shut and walk to the river.

A pair of women are washing sheets, soap bubbles rushing in clusters from the material. You wade calf-deep, untie the bag, and shake. They fall out, snarled, bloodied and wailing, they plop-plop into the current, where they become silvery-transparent, rushing away. Some are bound to forage a path back, but for now the bag is light and all the way home, you whistle.

165

Today I sat on a city bus, alone with my tired boredom. Living in a city of millions, like having your own personal sensory-deprivation chamber. We were all on the same bus, lurching and jerking towards our separate destinations. For one day, the usual bus rules were abolished. The eight facing seats became a women's quilting circle. Wrinkled fingers stitched a patchwork of scraps found in alleys and garbage cans. A man cradled an infant that suckled and spoke. Its language was steam on the windows, and the

business people yanked out their blue teeth, baked a blackberry pie, and scrawled messages in the condensation on those windows; contemporary, temporary hieroglyphs that said /hello/I am here/ I heart this/. They drew smiley faces and the baby giggled, meaning nothing but delight. A brown paper bag was passed around, and everyone kissed the moist lip of the bottle inside. Somewhere on that bus a boy was falling into love like a warm gopher hole. When we can have conversations unmitigated by cash flow, when the personhood of my person can touch the personhood of your person, then my dear, we'll really be getting somewhere. When we ask "how are you," and it has nothing to do with getting paid. The driver refused to collect fares, and the street unraveled into a skein of silk which the women rolled up through the rear windows, cutting it into patches and adding it to their quilt. It started to snow. When we wiped the steam from the windows, our surroundings were unrecognizable, white and crystalline. All maps were moot and the internet didn't exist. We will all have to return to work tomorrow, but tonight we play tiddlywinks and strive for understanding. Your eyes. Her eyes. His. Every imagined language.

166

If you wake in the night and you're not sure where you are, first locate your feet. Chances are, they will be right where you left them, attached at the ankles. From there, your body follows. Ask yourself these questions: Am I in a bed? Am I walking? Do the laws of gravity apply here? It can help, if you are uncertain, to find a glass of water, turn it over, and see which way it runs. A man much smarter than I once wrote that the most perilous moment of the day is waking, that it is a wonder, given the departure of dreaming, to rise and find things more or less as one left them upon entering sleep. Of course, you might be a dangerous dreamer – a somnambulist train-hopper, love affair-haver, a hobo with a harmonica, a corporate mermaid in pinstriped seaweed. Make your sandcastle, and shape your mote to your own liking – a decorative penny-lined oxidizing dream-fountain with fixed, simple bridges, or a rickety drawbridge over a pit of wolverines and werewolves. Whatever suits your liking. Whatever protects your dreaming. A great deal of explosive chemistry barricades the space between here and there. So wake on your own terms. Safeguard your emotions and your imagination. Hold it, somewhere in your boiling stomach, a flashing ember between fear and laughter. And then, step forward with all the courage and love you can muster.

167

There are owls in the pantry of your grandmother's convalescent home, and they speak in a low, rolling language that only the very old can understand. These people who have forgotten their lives assemble them everywhere, transforming nurses' aides into long-gone relatives and holding lengthy conversations with patterns of cracks in the walls and the relics of memory whitewashed over. Twice a week, a young, heavy-set woman washes your grandmother's coarse hair with soft, sturdy hands and a lavender-scented shampoo that consistently brings tears to your grandmother's eyes and reminisce to her lips, and twice a week your grandmother tells her the owls have been hucking their pellets into the jars of pickles and preserves. At night she hears them, hunting and hooting and retching, and she knows the tiny rodent bones they slip into her meals reassemble themselves in her stomach into tiny, dancing skeletons; the ghosts of her little

ones, long gone now. When her grown children come to visit her, she searches their faces without recognition and dismisses them, often without a word. But late at night, down the sterile, pine sol halls, the nurses' aides hear her speaking to them in the empty room, singing them lullabies, hooting away like a mad old bird.

168

Her body is draped with a thin sheet, and diagnosis is performed by auscultation, the doctor listening to her heart with a hollow, wooden instrument. She is awash in fever dreams, and he is listening for murmurs, gallops, and extra sounds corresponding with heartbeats. Here, he can hear the metallic backwashed ocean of thick blood, the soft drizzle symphony of her body's labored exertion. A din muffled in tissue and years of contained flooding. Her numb white lips quiver around unvoiced words, and alongside each (fluth) of her heart valves, he can hear another sound, a low creak like a ship tugging at its moorings. He closes his eyes, holds his breath, and presses the scope heavily against the hull of her. And then they are loose, roaming freely through a contained labyrinth of storm-swept tide. Slowing, gushing, whisking her away.

170

A cuckoo clock marks time on her wall, ticking steadily along with fir-cone shaped pendulum, until its giddy hourly outburst. The door snaps open, and a small, red-mouthed bird erupts from its close confines, hollering its proclamation of the hour loose on the world. And then, almost before the clamor is done, the door slams in its face. The woman whose day is marked by this instrument moves beneath it. She has soup on the stove and a telephone to her ear. She makes little cakes with almonds buried inside for good luck. Her shirt is faintly dusted with flour. "I can't talk about this. I have to go," she says into the receiver. She hangs up the phone hard, so its bell gives a staccato ding. Rinses her hands and presses them dry on her jeans. She winds the clock, stilling the pendulum with a soft hand while the other labors between the case and the wall, and then she starts the fir cone swinging again and nudges the dark, tooled-metal hands into their proper positions, and again they begin their measured descent toward evening.

172

How to trap a bear:

Signs of it were left everywhere. Steaming fecal heaps on the sidewalks evincing an omnivorous diet – berry seeds and fur.

1. Dig an ample pit with gradually-sloped sides. Soft soil is best. Turn the soil well so the walls of the pit are loose underfoot. Suspend a net above.

Nobody saw it, but the dogs howled in the night. Residents heard the hollow crash of toppled garbage cans, and the signposts were clawed to curls of wood, splinters raised in the pinking dawn like the hackles that bristled on their domestic pets, the hairs they could feel prickling on their own necks when they woke at night to the sound of that unidentified guttural moan.

2. Bears will usually respond to an offering of fruit or honey, or if these don't work, a live chicken should yield results.

Each morning, the net was crumpled over an empty pit. The children walked silently to the bus stop now, their heads on swivels, eyes gaping. Autumn's chill pulled the air taught, suspended their small clouded breaths.

3. If all else fails, the job may require a team of heroes with a tranquilizer gun.

The two designated for the job huddled under the trees at the edge of the field. A thin layer of fog clung tightly to the frozen ground of the clearing, but there was no bear.

4. In the morning, the trap was sprung again, bait emptied. Both of them swore up and down they had been awake and alert through the night. And though they tried it again and again with different watchers, the results were always the same.

This is how the heart of a community falters. Each sleeps with their own suspicions. In the morning, a little more is missing or scratched away. After a while, no one says a word.

173

There, there. Here we have machines to empty you, machines to fill you back up again. Do not worry, you will not be stroked with ungloved hand. You will exit cleaner than you entered, your skin perhaps paler, your muscles softened. Antibiotics, narcotics, bed rest. Tubes will help you breathe, will supply fluid when you cannot drink. It is all very simple. Sterile. Moderated and approved of by your PPO. During visiting hours, your family plummets to you, shards of metal drawn to a powerful magnet. They swarm around your bed, spectral and droning in the haze of fever. They're here for you, to tell you how they love you, you're looking good, you're gonna pull through. Nurses pad in in cloth-covered slippers and thin, blue facemasks. Are you comfortable? Are you in any pain? Can you count backwards from thirty? At a certain point you stare out the window. Hazy sky behind a splatter of pigeon droppings. Their splayed pattern forms into a face, lopsided and emitting a dim light. When you wake at night, a high whine of pain droning through your bones, its mouth pulls up at one corner, backlit by orange streetlamps, eyebrows low and nostrils flared. Come along, a voice croaks. Come along, now.

174

Our broken parts clatter against each other, making rhythms that resonate down the empty hallway, sounding with freight train pace and intensity, forward motion. Down this trestle we move, yoked flesh to flesh. This unhalting stop and go of us.

Chuff-chuff, our stationary bed breathes steam, slipping through a grove of ghostly birch. Bats coast within the shadows, flickering across the beam of our headlights. Beyond that tunnel of light, the landscape is undisclosed. If you told me we were driving through the middle of an ocean, I could find it in myself to smell the salt in the air, I'd dive off and go swimming. I am lost in the humid jungle of you. Curled against the cave of your navel.. Lashed and spasming, cupped in your hands and poured out, running over you in every direction, perfectly still.